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Space Exploration: on the Emergence of the Category of Space in European Linguistics

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The article looks at the emergence of linguistic geography as a distinct branch of linguistic science in the early twentieth century. The first part of the article deals with the predominance of the category of time in the nineteenth-century linguistics, and examines how early attempts were made to introduce the spatial factor in the study of language. It proceeds to analyse three linguistic doctrines of the 1920s, namely, the Neolinguistic school in Italy, the Eurasian movement of Russian émigrés in Europe, and early Soviet sociolignuistics, examining how the category of space became an organizing factor of their corresponding lingua-geographical models of the world. By focusing on the concept of language union, the article establishes common intellectual sources of the three movements, emphasising at the same time the crucial differences in their ideosophic platforms.

Keywords: Linguistic geography, Neolinguistics, the Eurasian movement, category of space, geographical model, sociolinguistics, language union, language contact, innovation, language borders, dialectology.

Introduction

Linguistic disputes that also involve geography are among the hardest to solve. In a recent example, Belgium has been stuck in a political deadlock with a strong linguistic component. At loggerheads since the general election in June 2010, Flemish and Francophone parties have so far failed to form a government, each pursuing their own nationalistic and linguistic agendas. There have even been speculations about a possible partition of Belgium, with Flemish Wallonia and Francophone Flanders following the sad fate of Leuven University, whose library was crudely divided during Belgium's language wars in the 1970s. Central to any national, nationalistic or ethnic project, the problem of spatial distribution of languages is crucial for such sensitive geo-political issues as state building, national determination, or minority rights. In the past it has often been dealt with through conflicts rather than policies, and even at present questions of lingua-geographical relevance tend to be approached with emotional rhetoric rather than scientific rigour.

In spite of the presence of the idea of an immediate interrelationship between ethnicity and language already in the philosophy of German Romanticism, the emergence of the

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category of space in European linguistics dates back only to the turn of the twentieth century, gaining broad significance in the 1920s and early 1930s. In this paper I will look at the category of space as an object of knowledge in linguistics, and will attempt to establish a link between such seemingly unrelated lingua-philosophical movements of the 1920s as linguistic geography in Italy, the Eurasian theory of Russian émigrés in Europe, and early Soviet sociolinguistics of the 1920s. Specifically, I will seek to examine how for each of these movements the spatial factor served as an organizing element of a peculiar ideological picture of the world, represented graphically with the help of the spatial distribution of languages.

Although a consistent scholarly interest in dialects emerged already in the late eighteenth century, it was not before the turn of the twentieth century that the category of space became a central element in European general linguistic theories. Indeed, historical linguistics of the Romantics, Comparativists and Neogrammarians alike, with their emphasis on the evolution of languages, was dominated by the category of time, represented by such vertical analytical models as August Schleicher's 'language family tree' or the Neogrammarians' rigorous phonetic laws, valid for all and any language at any time of their historical development. Such models presented language as a hermetic system, absolutely immune to the influence of external factors, while individual languages were understood as separate distinct entities, existing in a world of 'radical discontinuity' (Seriot, 1999a). Clearly, similar models had little to do with language reality, and even the potential of their use as methodological abstractions had been largely exhausted by the late nineteenth century. This problem, coupled with the steady advance of practical dialectology in the course of the previous years,[1] led some scholars to the recognition of the importance of the geographical factor and inspired their attempts at making it a part of theoretical linguistic constructions.

Johannes Schmidt (1843-1901) is usually hailed as the pioneer of geographical linguistics, since his 1872 Wave theory (*Wellentheorie*) was the first to introduce and elaborate the category of space in relation to language. Schmidt's metaphor of waves or circles on water came to substitute the earlier biological metaphor, and as such added a horizontal, spatial, axis to the previously unique temporal vertical. For Schmidt, languages are similar to circles made by throwing a stone into a body of water, whose centres or peripheries are impossible to establish. In the same fashion as the circles overlap, neighbouring languages display similarities between each other and exert reciprocal influences. A linguistic innovation started at one particular point in space is transferred in all directions and may become characteristic of a group of adjacent languages. Schmidt insisted that it was enough to look at the geographical map to explain why Slavonic languages retained more common features with the Sanskrit than Germanic languages: their geographical proximity to the Indo-Iranian group of languages meant that these features were diffused spatially. By focusing on a geographical distribution of languages, the Wave theory brought to the fore the notions of transition and spatial correlation of language facts, and as such made a significant step towards linguistic continuity and relativity. It was a move towards a twentieth-century vision of time and space in linguistics, characterized by Roman Jakobson as 'directly inspired by the discussion which developed around the theory of relativity, with its rejection of time conceived in absolute, and its will to co-ordinate the problems of time and space' (Jakobson and Pomorska, 1980: 59-60). The first doctrine to fully engage with the category of space was the so called linguistic or dialect geography whose representatives, as I will shortly demonstrate, interpreted the correlation

between space and language from a geographical point of view, offering a more realistic linguistic vision of the world than that in the nineteenth-century diachronic models.

A Geographical Model of Space

Breakthroughs in linguistic geography were to come from various directions and from within different philosophical frameworks. A famous German dialectologist Georg Wenker (1852-1911) compiled his linguistic questionnaire with 40 sentences in standard German which he sent out to provincial teachers for 'translations' into local dialects, largely with the aim of testing and verifying in the field the neo-grammarian principles.[2] However, what emerged in the result of his enquiry contradicted the established sound laws and gave a glimpse of a new science, whose formulation came slightly more than twenty years later. In 1902, Jules Gilliéron (1854-1926) and Edmond Edmont (1849-1926) published the first part of their celebrated *Atlas linguistique de la France*, which has been acclaimed as the first fundamental work of linguistic geography proper.[3] The *Atlas*, which would come out in separate volumes until 1915, contained under 2000 maps representing graphically the distribution of phonetic and lexical dialectal features, which Edmont had recorded cycling around France and the Romance-speaking territories of Belgium, Switzerland and Italy. In their dialectological surveys, both Wenker and Gilliéron discovered a factor that affirmed the newly emphasized spatial dimension as crucial for any language investigation: they came across the existence of lines, known today as *isoglosses*, which characterize the distribution of dialectal features. It appeared that these lines never coincided to delineate a distinct zone of dialectal variation; on the contrary, their distribution repudiated the whole idea of distinct, integral, closed languages and dialects, as the newly drawn linguistic maps revealed how each isogloss went its own way not only for different dialectal features, but also for individual words with one and the same dialectal characteristic. Thus, dialect linguistics presented a new picture of the world, unique in its linguistic diversity and continuity. It focused on the geographical distribution and the history of individual words at the same time, which allowed to correlate the spatial and the temporal factors in the life of languages. As Albert Dauzat, a French disciple of Gilliéron's, put it: 'The essential aim of linguistic geography is to reconstruct the history of words, of inflexions, of syntactic groupings, on the basis of the distribution of the existent forms and types. This distribution is not a fortuitous effect; it is a result of the past, as well as of geographical conditions and the environment, of which man is an integral part. [...] Geographical linguistics is concerned with the geographical distribution of words – their migrations, their expansions, their retreats – and the encounters, the shocks, the changes experienced during these journeys.' (Dauzat, 1922: 27, 46)

It may be argued, however, that the most original formulation of these principles came from the Italian Neolinguists, a neo-romantic movement of the 1920s, inspired by the idealist aesthetic philosophy of Benedetto Croce, who in 1900 made a plea to return linguistics to the realm of human will. The most prominent representatives of the movement were Matteo Bartoli (1873-1946), Giulio Bertoni (1878-1942), Giuliano Bonfante, and Vittore Pisani (1899-1975). Approaching language study from idealist tenets and in fierce opposition to the Neogrammarians, the Neolinguists (whose name itself was a polemical shot at the former) made spatial distribution of languages the cornerstone of their ideological worldview, in which language was understood as human aesthetic activity and presented in the same category as literature, art and religion. For the Neolinguists, historical

study of language remained very important, but the crucial difference from their predecessors lay in their 'human', as opposed to abstract, understanding of the history of a language. What they saw as the Neogrammarians' fault of being 'linguists *in abstracto*, outside time and space' was redressed in the Neolinguists' attempt to study the geographical distribution of linguistic phenomena, based on the idea that 'every word has not only its own history, but also (as does every form, sound, sentence, and saying) its own geography' (Bonfante, 1947, quoted from Zvegintsev, 1956: 351). For the Italian school, linguistic geography was to become an integral part of any linguistic investigation, on a par with philosophical and historical reflection on language (Bertoni and Bartoli, 1925: 38). This approach was reflected in the Neolinguists' research methodology, specifically defined as *geografia linguistica* and *linguistica spaziale*.

An interesting observation should be made here. Although the Neolinguists' idealism was ostensibly opposed to what they call 'the Neogrammarians' materialism', it is precisely the Neolinguistic idealist platform, based on the presumption of language as a spiritual aesthetic phenomenon, that allowed the Italian scholars to admit extra-linguistic – historical, geographical, social, and cultural factors – into the previously rigorously abstracted linguistic science, and by doing so to render it curiously more 'materialist' than they had ever intended. In Bonfante's words: 'A Neolinguist, emphasizing the aesthetic nature of language, knows that language, similarly to all other human phenomena, emerges in certain historical conditions, and therefore a history of the French language cannot be written without taking into account the entire history of France – Christianity, German invasions, feudalism, Italian influence, the court, the Academy, the French Revolution, Romanticism and so on; without taking into account the fact that the French language is an expression, an essential part of the French culture and French spirit. ' (Bonfante, quoted from Zvegintsev, 1956: 338). On the one hand, this ideosophic position can be related directly to German Romantics of the early 19th century and Karl Vossler's linguistic philosophy; on the other, and perhaps less predictably, to Soviet sociolinguists of the 1920s, who professed a similar kind of 'materialism', inspired by many idealist sources, most prominently Gustav Shpet's phenomenology. The not so obvious link between the two movements is found in their emphasis on the interrelation of language and society, and on the necessity to examine this relationship with the help of a new research methodology.

The Neolinguists used the category of geographical space as their main methodological tool to study chronological relations between two different linguistic forms, on the one hand, and the emergence and distribution of linguistic innovations, on the other. More in particular, a chronological relationship between two linguistic forms can be deduced from a geographical relation between two areas, where these facts are observed. Bartoli distinguishes five types of geographical areas, which are used to characterize the temporal relationship between two different linguistic forms with the same meaning: isolated area, peripheral area, major area, posterior (successive) area and, finally, extinct area. On the basis of this distinction, it becomes possible to establish which of the two forms is older, since more ancient forms are usually preserved in isolated or peripheral areas, as less accessible for the spread of linguistic innovations. Linguistic innovation is, as a matter of fact, the Neolinguists' main unit of analysis, which holds together the whole temporal-spatial model. The history of any innovation is a history of language conflict between two or more forms, and the Neolinguistic methodology is aimed precisely at explaining the outcomes of

such conflicts by examining where and how an innovation started, and how it travelled through time and space. In sharp contrast to the linguistic theories of the previous century, which portrayed languages in radical discontinuity and closed integrity, the Neolinguists believed that what existed in the reality was only a great number of dialects, isoglosses, and transitory zones, which competed and interacted in an uninterrupted lingua-geographical continuum. In this sense, the Neolinguists 'updated' Schmidt's wave theory, by substituting the model of waves with the model of irradiation of linguistic innovations. Theirs was a world of languages without borders. A linguistic innovation started at any point in space, can irradiate in any direction with any speed or degree of success, which depend on geographical factors (such as the isolated or central character of an area) and socio-historical factors (such as social prestige of its author, or the circumstances of its first production) (Bertoni and Bartoli, 1925: 49-50).

The prominence of spatial thinking in the Neolinguistic conception, in general, and their idea of fluid lingua-geographical continuum, in particular, meant that their thesis of the absence of linguistic borders was extrapolated from languages of the same language group (like, for instance, Italian and French) onto languages of the same language family (Indo-European: Czech and German), and even languages of different language families (Russian and Finnish). Neolinguistics argues that geographical proximity of languages allows them to exert strong reciprocal influences, which result in similarities even when these languages are genetically unrelated. Thus, in Bonfante's characteristic examples, Romanian had experienced such a strong influence of the Slavonic languages, that it ran the risk of moving from the Romance language family to the Slavonic one; Czech, on the other hand, has a unique among Slavonic languages feature of root stress, most likely acquired under the German influence (Bonfante, quoted from Zvegintsev, 1956: 340-42). On the basis of such extensive examples from a great number of languages, the Neolinguists formulated the principle of language unions (*lega linguistica*), which simultaneously opposed and complimented the family tree model, with its diachronic and genetic relations among languages. The geographical model of language relations, by contrast, served to demonstrate that linguistic features could not only be inherited but, most significantly, could be transferred in space.

The theorists of Neolinguistics insisted that their concept of language unions bore no essential differences from the one, formulated by the Prague Linguistic Circle (Bonfante, quoted from Zvegintsev, 1956: 340). It has been argued, however, that behind the seeming outward similarity of the two theories, a crucial difference, consisting in their contrasting ideological worldviews, can be discerned. If the Neolinguists' model of language space was essentially geographical, the one propounded by the members of the Eurasian movement Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Roman Jakobson and the geographer Petr Savitskii, has been sometimes described as geometrical.[4]

A Geometrical Model of Space

The Russian term *языковой союз* appeared in Nikolai Trubetzkoy's work of 1923 *The Tower of Babel and the Confusion of Languages* [Вавилонская башня и смешение языков], and was introduced into international linguistic terminology in 1928 as *Sprachbund*. Trubetzkoy's concept was born inside the Eurasian theory, an intellectual and ideological doctrine of Russian émigrés, which was firstly formulated in Sofia in 1921 and which postulated the existence of a natural, organic, unity of the numerous multi-ethnic peoples of Russia and the neighbouring lands, determined by their geographic, historical

and cultural affinities. The so-called Eurasia was fashioned to challenge what the Eurasianists refuted as a civilisation defined exclusively by European standards. In the Eurasian polemic, the category of space was of paramount importance, as it served to explain and justify a geopolitical unity of Eurasia, whose geographical, cultural, historical, ethnolinguistic and anthropological characteristics were shared among the Slavs, Caucasians, Turks, Mongols and Finno-Ugrians and, in their organic totality, radically opposed Europe.

At first sight, Trubetzkoy's *sprachbund* is strikingly reminiscent of the Italian *lega linguistica*. Trubetzkoy asserts that apart from the genetic relations among languages of the same branch, group, or family, there exist geographical relations between spatially adjacent languages, independently of their origin. Similarly, language unions may exist not only between individual languages, but also between two or more language families. Some languages, and even language families, occupy a transitory position between two language unions, or even belong to more than one simultaneously. In fact, argues Trubetzkoy, the whole world is linked by means of language unions, which, together with the genetically grouped languages, form a linguistic continuum, a rainbow, whose colours-languages melt into each other in a gradual, imperceptible fashion. From this description it may indeed seem that the Eurasian worldview does not differ much from the Neolinguistic one. And yet, a number of important differences put the two in sharp relief. Firstly, the Neolinguistic idealist philosophy is centred on the individual, as the source of artistic inspiration and linguistic production, who gives birth to innovations and, ultimately, determines the evolution of language; the Eurasianists, by contrast, declare the necessity of total subjugation of the individual by the personified collective. Secondly, and in immediate reference to language unions, the Neolinguistic worldview is incompatible with the idea of closed entities, and looks at all languages as fluid and mixed phenomena, a result of ethnic and cultural mixtures between peoples. Quite on the contrary, for the Eurasianists the organic closed totality of a culture is unsurpassable. The metaphoric rainbow of world languages, from the Neolinguistic point of view, would be an infinite, even chaotic, diversity of shades – language facts; while for Trubetzkoy, 'it is a balanced, harmonious system, in which every component, however small, conserves its unique individuality' (Trubetzkoy, 1923: 122). Another essential difference is found in Jakobson's own take on the idea of *sprachbund*, examined in his celebrated theory of phonological language union. An interesting interpretation suggests that by means of establishing inter-systemic phonological features between languages, Jakobson sought to supply a proof for an ontological existence of Eurasia, 'a particular geographical world, unique and total' (Jakobson, 1931: 5). He put forward a totally different from the Neolinguistic, a teleological, understanding of language union. If for the Neolinguists similarities between genetically unrelated neighbouring languages are explained by fortuitous facts, such as language mixtures and contacts, as well as by social prestige, substrate, and incessant borrowings; for Jakobson it is 'the unity of purposefulness' [*единство целеустремленности*] that explains convergences in unrelated languages, which have different origins but the same direction of development [*единоустремленные языки*]. Once again, the open, borderless linguistic world of the Neolinguists is contrasted by a world, where similar features between languages are mostly explained by parallel development, and by parallel acquisition of cognate systemic features. It is Trubetzkoy's and especially Jakobson's fascination with the symmetry, harmony and a

certain ontological order of the Eurasian language union that, in Seriot's opinon, makes their model of space appear strikingly geometrical.

It may be argued, however, that it is precisely the Eurasian imperative, with its sincere multiculturalism and its attempts to define the individual parts of the big 'Eurasian' whole, that became instrumental in Soviet language reforms of the 1920s. On the one hand, the Eurasian theory embraced phenomenological and structural approaches of Soviet linguists, while on the other, it became 'a dominant pillar of state identity' (Smith, 1998: 70). The Soviet drive to the east meant, for the time being, that the Communist party policy makers and enthusiastic linguists were united in their campaigns for emancipation, codification and standardisation of non-Russian national languages, which after the October revolution were granted considerable privileges. This immensely daring project, in Smith's words, 'embodied the best merits of Trubetzkoy's and Jakobson's fraternal union' (Smith, 1998: 70).

One may recall at this point that earlier I have established a tentative link between the Neolinguistic scholars and Soviet linguists, which lay in their similar reliance on idealist philosophical sources and their admission of external socio-cultural factors into linguistic research. With the Eurasian theory also seen as one of the ideological bases of Soviet language reform and early sociolinguistics, a close intellectual connection between the three movements becomes obvious. Indeed, the whole phenomenon of the emergence of the category of space in European linguistics of the early twentieth century acquires a new significance. In terms of the future developments in linguistic science, the new spatial treatment of languages brought home the understanding that 'apart from the differences of purely spatial order, there are distinctions of social and cultural type. [...] a group of questions of geographical *and* social dialectology' (Jakobson and Pomorska 1980: 79-80). And as for an assessment of the geopolitical relevance of the relationship between language and geography, it is enough to recall Belgium's woes or the recent rise of interest in a pan-Berber project in North Africa, to fully appreciate its contemporary resonance. Linguistic disputes and language conflicts that also involve geography are here to stay.

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[1] For a detailed historical overview of the developments in dialectology, see Sever Pop, 1950. *La dialectologie. Aperçu historique et méthodes d'enquêtes linguistiques*. Louvain.

[2] The opposite widespread opinion that Wenker set out in his 1876 research of the Low German dialects of the Rhineland to actually disprove the exceptionlessness of the neo-grammarian sound laws, has been recently contested by Konrad Koerner, who argues that this myth was born thanks to the statements of Ferdinand Wrede, Wenker's successor at the University of Marbourg (see Koerner's paper 'The Origins and Functions of Myths in the History of Linguistics: The Case of Wenker's Dialectology' presented at the International Conference 'The History of Linguistics in Texts and Concepts', Potsdam University, November 2001).

[3] The primary goal of the authors' research work between 1897 and 1901 was to produce a comparative study of Romance dialects on solid, scientifically valid, principles applied in extensive fieldwork. It was the scope and the novelty of the systematically represented language material that determined the success of the *Atlas* and its reception as a foundation of a new linguistic science.

[4] Patrick Seriot has published extensively on this subject arguing that Jakobson's *евразийский фонологический союз* is an example of a geometrically ideal 'neo-Platonic' model.

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Исследование пространства: возникновение категории пространства в европейском языкознании начала XX века

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В данной статье рассматривается вопрос возникновения в европейской лингвистике начала двадцатого века научного интереса к проблемам языкового пространства и выработке новых научно-методологических подходов к изучению пространственного распространения языков. В статье предлагается сравнительный анализ лингвогеографических идей, сформулированных представителями трех научных направлений, таких как итальянская школа Неолингвистики, движение Евразийцев и советская социолингвистика 1920-х годов.

Ключевые слова: лингвистическая география, пространство, языковой союз, генеалогическое древо языков, языковой контакт, инновация, лингвогеографическая модель мира.